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Girls Playing Basketball



by Yvonne Johnson



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Characters: SENDA BERENSON ABBOTT, CLARA GREGORY BAER, DR. JAMES NAISMITH

Setting: Stage with a table and chair. SENDA is writing at a table. A basketball is on floor.

Costumes: Characters are dressed in 1890s clothes. SENDA and CLARA are wearing long skirts and high-neck blouses. DR. NAISMITH is wearing a suit with a jacket and vest.

Props: Basketball, papers, pencil or pen

SENDA *(looks up from paper and stops writing, then talks to audience very happily):* Well, hello, young people! I am delighted to meet you! *(Puts her hand to her ear, as if trying to hear better.)* What? Who am I? *(Puts a hand to her chest.)* Oh, I'm so sorry! I forget that you are not used to people from the past coming and talking to you! Well, my name is Senda Berenson Abbott.



Senda Berenson Abbott (1868–1954)





SENDA: I came to the United States from the country now called Lithuania. And—oh, but I didn't come to tell you my whole life story! I came to tell you about basketball!

DR. NAISMITH *(off stage):* Did somebody say "basketball"?

SENDA *(to audience):* Oh, goodness! It's Dr. James Naismith, the man who invented basketball! *(Calling to* DR. NAISMITH.*)* Oh, Dr. Naismith, there are some young people I'd like you to meet! I want to tell the story of how girls started playing basketball!



Dr. James Naismith (1861–1939)

DR. NAISMITH *(entering):* What's that? Young people from the twenty-first century again? I do like seeing them! They are so different from us, and yet they are the same. I mean, more than a century separates us, and yet—



Extend Language **Words for Numbers of Years**

Decade means 10 years, *century* means 100 years, and *millennium* means 1,000 years.



SENDA *(smiling at* DR. NAISMITH*):* And yet basketball brings us together, right?

DR. NAISMITH: Yes! I'm sorry, Mrs. Abbott! You were talking to these young people, and I've disturbed you!

SENDA: Not at all, Dr. Naismith. Actually, the story begins with you. *(To audience)* You see, it all started in December, 1891. Dr. Naismith was a physical education teacher at a school for young men in Springfield, Massachusetts. He was asked to invent a game that the young men could play indoors during the winter. Will you please tell the story, Dr. Naismith?

DR. NAISMITH: With pleasure! *(To audience)* Well, I had a few ideas, and I came up with a game! I was going to nail two boxes to the balcony rail of the gymnasium. There would be two teams. These boxes, on opposite sides of the gymnasium, would be the goals. Each team had to shoot a ball into their box. The other team had to stop them. *(Picks up the basketball and bounces it a few times.)* Shall we show them, Mrs. Abbott?

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physical education: gym class

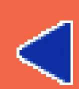


SENDA: I don't think that's necessary, Dr. Naismith. I think these young people have played basketball before. Or they have seen basketball games on—what is that called again? *(Stops to think.)* On television, yes! You must forgive me. You have to understand that we didn't have many of the inventions you have today.

DR. NAISMITH: That's right. I often forget how things have changed! *(To audience)* To go on with my story, we couldn't find boxes, so we nailed wooden peach baskets up to the balcony rail. They were not hoops with nets on them—oh, no! That would come many years later! And the ball we used was not as bouncy as the one used today. That would come many years later, too! For that first game, we used a soccer ball!



It took very little time for basketball to become a game for girls, as well as boys.






SENDA *(to audience):* A month after Dr. Naismith invented the game, I read about it. It sounded wonderful! I was a physical education teacher at Smith College, a college for girls. I was looking for a game that my girls would enjoy. Basketball seemed like a good game. But I was worried that it would be too rough for my girls. *(Laughs and shakes her head.)* Oh, I know! Nobody thinks that way now! But the times were very different back then. I did not think that girls should play the same fast basketball game that boys played.

DR. NAISMITH: Mrs. Abbott, don't be too hard on yourself! Just think—if it were not for you, girls might not have played basketball at all!

SENDA: You're very kind, Dr. Naismith. But it's true. People didn't want girls playing basketball at all! So, to make the game less rough for girls, I changed some of the rules. That was more acceptable—at least for many people. But there were some people who kept girls from joining basketball teams. It makes me so sad to think about it! *(Shakes her head sadly.)*

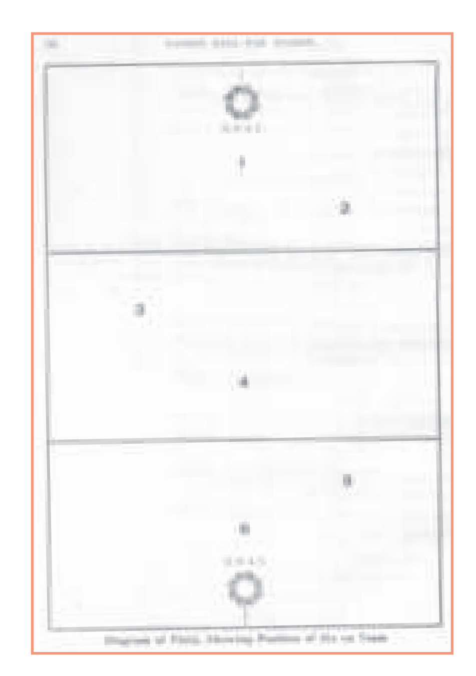


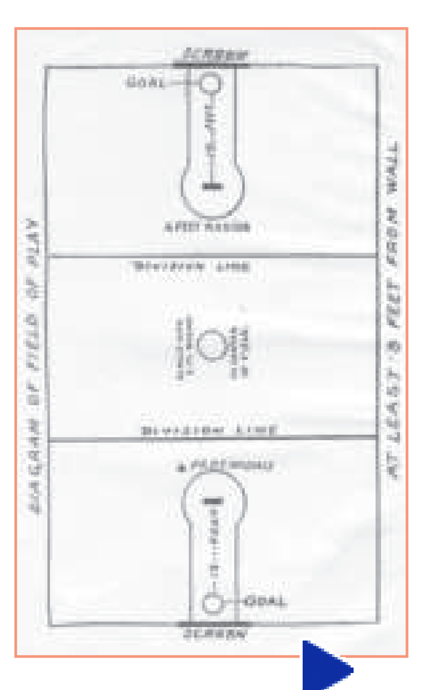


DR. NAISMITH: But why don't you tell the young people what your rules were like, Mrs. Abbott?

SENDA *(holds up paper on table with drawing of the basketball court):* For girls, I divided the basketball court into three sections, instead of the two sections for boys. And my game had from six to ten players on the court for each team. Each player had to stay in her own section, so there was less running. Doctors of that time said that running all over the court was bad for girls' hearts.

DR. NAISMITH: And there was one more important change, wasn't there, Mrs. Abbott?





These diagrams show how Senda Berenson Abbott divided the basketball court for girls' basketball.



SENDA: Yes, I didn't think girls should swat the ball away from another player, the way boys did. Snatching the ball away seemed very rough for girls. *(Shaking her head)* I'm so glad all that has changed for you young people!

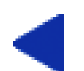
CLARA *(offstage):* Aren't you forgetting another difference, Senda? Something to do with clothes?

SENDA: That sounds like Clara! *(Calling to* CLARA.*)* Come in, Clara! *(To audience)* Young people, this is Clara Gregory Baer. She is very important in basketball history, too! She was a physical education teacher in New Orleans, Louisiana. She heard about Dr. Naismith's game, too.

CLARA *(entering):* Hello, everyone! Yes, when I heard about basketball, I wanted my girls to play it. But it wasn't considered proper for young ladies at all! So I invented my own rules.



Long skirts made it hard for women to move around.





DR. NAISMITH: I remember your rules. I suggested that you give your game a new name!

CLARA: Yes, I called it *Basquette* (bahs KETT). My game was even stricter than the one Senda invented. There were more rules. I had more divisions on the court. And the girls could not talk or yell during the game. There's one way I made the game better for girls!

SENDA: I know what you're going to say! Your girls were the first to wear bloomers when they played! Before that, girls played in long skirts!

CLARA: That's right. *(To audience)* Well, at first the girls did not like the girl's pants called bloomers at all. They wanted to wear their regular clothes—long dresses, hats, gloves. But after playing a few times in those clothes, they were happy to wear bloomers!

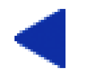




These pants were called bloomers, after a woman named Amelia Bloomer.







SENDA *(to* CLARA*):* Bloomers were a big help. But later girls didn't have to dress differently from boys anymore. That took about forty years, didn't it? In the 1920s, girls still had to wear long stockings under short bloomers. Today, a girl can wear a jersey and shorts.

DR. NAISMITH: And anybody can watch anybody play! Do you remember, ladies, when only girls could watch girls play? In those days, that was normal.

SENDA: Yes, basketball is so much more fast-paced now! Girls and boys play a very similar game, although the ball for women is a little smaller. Our hands are smaller, that's all.



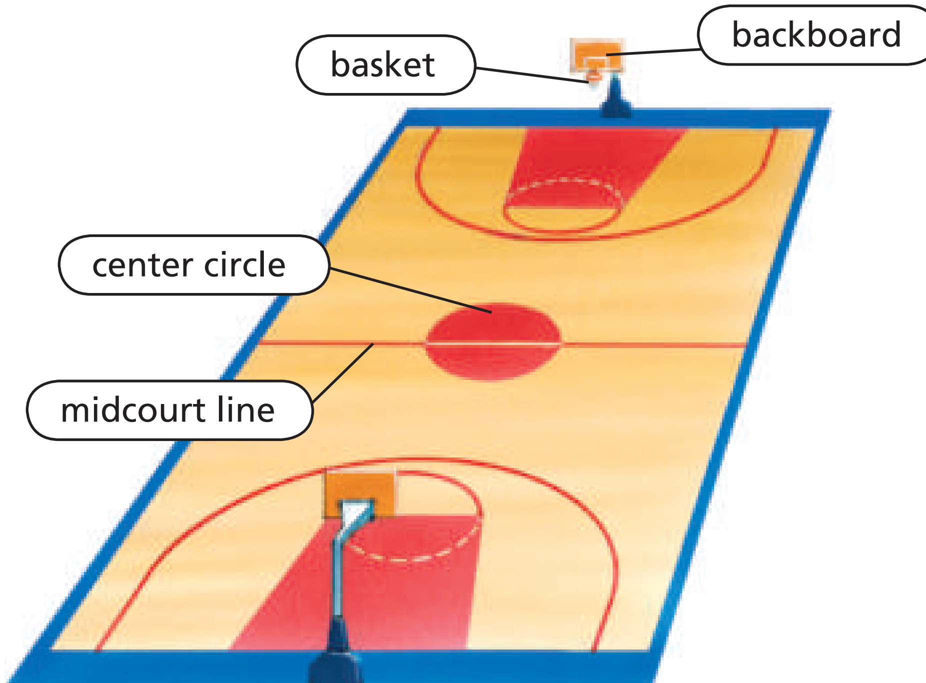
CLARA: Yes, but our love for the game is just as great! And speaking of the game, old friends, why don't we play a little? All this talk about basketball makes me want to *(picks up basketball and passes it to* SENDA*)* play!

SENDA: Why not? *(To audience)* If you'll excuse us, we have a game to play. Maybe some day you'd like to join us?

DR. NAISMITH: Yes, join us some time!

ALL: Goodbye, young people! Have fun playing our game! *(They exit stage, dribbling the ball and passing it to one another as they go.)*

BASKETBALL COURT





Basketball is played by two teams of five players each. The players dribble, pass, and shoot the ball. Points are scored when a player shoots the ball through the hoop that the other team is guarding.

Highlights of Woman's Basketball History

1891	Basketball is invented by Dr. Naismith.
1892	Senda Berenson changes the rules to develop basketball for women.
1895	Clara Gregory Baer publishes the rules for Basquette, a form of basketball.
1901	Senda Berenson publishes the rules for Basketball for Women. (Later she married and became Mrs. Abbott.)
1918	Basket with open bottom becomes official. Before this, a closed basket with a pull chain to open it was used.
1926	The first national women's basketball championship is held. The teams play by men's rules.
1936	All American Red Heads Team is formed. The players dyed their hair red or wore red wigs. The team played against men.
1976	Women's basketball is played at the Olympic Games in Montreal.
1999	The Women's Basketball Hall of Fame has its grand opening.



Talk About It

1. Why did Senda Berenson Abbott change the rules of basketball for girls?
2. How did the clothes that girls wore while playing basketball change over the years?

Write About It

3. On a separate sheet of paper, write about a sport that you know or like. Tell about at least one rule. paper, write about some of the ways he did this.

Extend Language

Like all sports, basketball has names for different moves and plays. For example, a **jump shot** is a shot done while jumping up in the air. A **rebound** is when a player grabs a missed shot at the basket. Find out how to explain the verbs *dribble*, *pass* and *shoot* as used in this sport. Do you know any other basketball terms?

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